

ST. DENIS PATRON SAINT OF SYPHILITICS*

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One of the special pleasures of the recent meeting of the Medical Society for the Study of Venereal Diseases in Paris, was the visit to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Among the many small chapels of the Cathedral was that of St. Denis, which reminded me of the apparently little-known fact, noted some years ago by William Sargant in his book "Battle for the Mind" (1957), that St. Denis is the patron saint of syphilitics. While our guide knew the traditional story of St. Denis, he was unaware of this fact. It is hardly surprising that venereologists know little of St. Denis. He receives only a fleeting mention in Howles's "Synopsis of Clinical Syphilis" (1943), where we find Castiglione's story of how Thierry de Hery, a physician, said to a priest while he knelt before the statue of Charles VIII at St. Denis, "Charles VIII is a good enough saint for me. He put 30,000 francs in my pocket when he brought the pox to France".

The Catholic Encyclopaedia states that a patron saint must first be canonized and then assigned by tradition, arising from popular devotion or by election, as a special intercessor. For this reason he is honoured by clergy and people. The term "patron" therefore, carries a wider meaning than "titular", which is applied solely to the patron of a church or institution. On March 23, 1638, the legislation of Pope Urban VII defined the reasons for the selection of patrons, but the patronage of many remains confused, *e.g.* in the case of patron saints of countries, some countries have none while others have several.

The Middle Ages was an age of faith and it is not surprising to find a natural extension of patronage to cover life's ordinary interests—such as health, family, and trades.

In pre-reformation England alone, 40,000 religious corporations existed, including ecclesiastical bodies of all kinds, monasteries, convents, military orders, industrial and professional guilds, and

charitable institutions, each of which had its own patron saint. The vastness of the subject has made duplication inevitable and something of this may be seen when common knowledge is reviewed with the following examples:

St. Christopher for porters
St. Claud for nail-makers
St. Luke, St. Cosmos, and St. Damian for doctors
St. Lydia for dyers
St. Luke for painters
St. Raymond Nonnatus for midwives
St. Vitus for comedians
St. Blandine for girls
St. Gregory for scholars
St. Agatha for disease of the breast
St. Apollonia for toothache
St. Hubert for dog bites
St. Clare and St. Lucy for the eyes

In many cases the saint was chosen and cherished because of some real connexion between the subject and the patron, *e.g.* the type of miracle performed during the saint's life or after death through his intercession; or through a play on words, *e.g.* St. Clare and St. Lucy being the protectors of the eyes. The great and special saints had their clients over all Christendom and as they might vary in regard to any subject with time and place, this too has added to the duplication and confusion.

It is probable that sufferers from syphilis had recourse to St. Denis as one of the patron saints of syphilis, but there is little factual evidence. However, there is the prayer published in Nuremberg in 1497 and now kept in the Munich library. A black and white reproduction is shown in Arturo Castiglione's "History of Medicine" (1947), and a full colour reproduction in Karl Sudhoff's "Graphische und Typographische Erstlinge der Syphilisliteratur aus den Jahren 1495–1496" (1925). A translation of the prayer reads as follows:

"O most holy father and mighty helper, Denis; Archbishop and praiseworthy martyr. O thou heavenly teacher, Apostle of France, and mighty ruler of the

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German lands. Protect me from the terrible disease called the French malady from which you freed a great many Christian people in France when they tasted the water from the living spring which welled up from beneath your sacred body. Protect me from the wretched illness, O most gracious father Denis, that I may make amends for my sin, by which I have offended my Lord, and that after this life I may come to the joy of eternal bliss. May Jesus Christ grant me this. He who made your most dark locked dungeon a consoling home and gave you to eat His most holy Body and Blood and said: Because of the love and goodness you have shown Me always, whatsoever you shall ask, it shall be given unto you. May He be blessed in eternity. Amen."

The connexion between St. Denis and the disease of syphilis would appear to lie in the question of nationality. If a list of the various late 15th and 16th century names given to the disease in the various continental languages is reviewed, we find that some reference to France or the supposed French origin predominates.* It would seem that, St. Denis being the patron saint of France, all sufferers from the *mal français* might do well to appeal to this protector of the French in their hopes for a cure.

Two allusions in the Nuremberg prayer seem to demand some explanation. First, the reference to St. Denis as the ruler of the German lands. No connexion has been found between Germany and St. Denis, nor does one suggest itself. It may simply be that a recognition of an extension of the saint's power might effect speedier interpretation of the intercession and the longed-for cure. Secondly, there is the mention of a spring which welled up under St. Denis's body. This is a puzzle. As St. Denis is addressed in the prayer as the Apostle of France, the St. Denis who was the patron saint of France and of Paris is obviously the one referred to. However, there is nothing to be found in the legend of the saint regarding a spring of water, fountain, or well, connected with his tomb or with the translation of his body.

According to the traditional legend which we owe to Gregory of Tours, St. Denis, first Bishop of Paris,

was sent from Rome, *circa* 250 A.D., to preach the Gospel to the Gauls. After detention at Arles and elsewhere, he arrived in Paris to make numerous converts. He was imprisoned in the Cité by the Roman Governor between 272–290 at the spot now occupied by the Church of St. Denis de la Chartre at the most southern point of the Pont Nôtre Dame. Together with two companions, Rusticus, archpriest, and Eleutharus, archdeacon, he was tortured and finally led towards the Roman temple of Mercury (apt perhaps) at the top of the Butte (Montmartre), following the paths which are now known as the Rue St. Martin, the Rue Montmartre, and the Rue des Martyrs. At the foot of the hill where now stands the Chapel of the Rue Antoinette, St. Denis and his companions were beheaded. Then followed the miracle by which St. Denis is best remembered. The headless saint arose and, picking up his head, walked over Montmartre to the plain beyond. After 6 km. (3.75 miles), he fell dead at the feet of a Christian woman named Catulla who buried him and later his two companions. Afterwards a chapel was built over the supposed resting place of the saint. This was later replaced by the Abbey of St. Denis, built by King Dagobert *circa* 630. The Latin martyrologists simply state that the bodies were thrown into the Seine.

There is no hint in this traditional legend of water welling up under the saint's body, but the Michelin guide to Paris adds to the story, telling us that St. Denis on the way to his burial stopped by a fountain and there washed the blood and dust from his head before taking it to Catulla. A search of maps and guide books, however, does not show any fountain commemorating this event, and it would seem then that the writer of the Nuremberg prayer was under a misapprehension.

Later tradition in medieval and renaissance times has embellished the story of St. Denis. He was identified with Dionysius the Areopagite, whose conversion by St. Paul at Athens is recorded in Acts XVII, 34, and became first Bishop of Athens. This confusion between the original St. Denis and Dionysius seems to have sprung from the rediscovery of the 9th century "Life" by Hilduin, Abbot of St. Denis. This book is generally thought to be a tissue of fables, but it does lead us to consideration of a further possibility regarding the question of water. Some twenty holders of the title of St. Dionysius are listed in the "Acta Sanctorum" (1863–68) of the Bollandists,* an association or succession of Jesuits

* Albdras; Male delle broghie; Gangrena grossa; Condiloma; Lichne; Mentagora; Mertagra; Mertagrae; Morbille; Morbillorum species; Morbilli venerosi; Nodi foedi; Platern; Grosse; Swartzte Wilde; Pose Platern; Grosse Blotten; Pocken; Pustulae; Morbus pustularum; Pustulae malae; Rogne; Scabies epidemica; Scabiea glutinosa; Nova scabies; Scabies mala francosa; Schorra; Variola grossa; Variola chronica, croniqua; Variolae verrucales; Gross vayrolle, verolle; Zapfen; Male frasso; Franozos; Franzosen; Francosae; Francosic; Francosica morbus Francioxo; Mal franzos; Male frantzoso; Mala franzos; mala francose, Male francos, Male franzoze; Male franciosse; Male franciosso; Male francioxo; Mayl franzoze; Mall de franzozi; Mall di franzoza; Malade frantzoz; Bloten male francosa; Bolle franciose; Bozoli chiamete franciosse; Contrakt mal di frantzoz; Dogle franciosse; Piage franciosse; Platern, mayl franzoze; Malum francicum; Malum franciae; Morbus franciosus; Morbus francorum; Morbus gallicus; Maladie de Naples; Male de Yob; Mele de S. Yob; St. Hiobs Kranckheit; Sante Job Suykten; Plate egipioiaca; Kranckheit Sant Menus; Sand Monus Kranckheit; Male morigeratum; Planta noctis.

* The term "Bollandist" arises from Joannes Bolland (1596–1665), who used and augmented the work of the Jesuits. I understand that, although fifty volumes have been published, the work is not yet complete.

engaged in the collection and publication of the lives of the saints of the Roman calendar, and by these authors St. Denis's day is assigned to October 9.

It is possible that Dionysius the Areopagite, or any one of the twenty Saints Dionysius, may have been confused with St. Denis of France and Paris. Stories relating to a saint's decapitation and walking off carrying his own head and causing a spring to well up, frequently recur in the *Acta Sanctorum*: e.g. St. Chrysolius martyred in Belgium, St. Leo martyred by priests at Rouen, and St. Hilarian of Espalion, Charlemagne's confessor. These, and others, are almost always French or Belgian saints, and the writer of the Nuremberg prayer may have applied such a story to St. Denis in error.

Another possible explanation of the reference to water in the Nuremberg prayer may arise from a miracle recorded at the time when Ste. Geneviève was supervising the building of the church of St. Denis. The workers complained about the shortage of drinking water, which had eventually to be fetched from Paris. Thanks to the power of Ste. Geneviève, the contents of the vessel in which the water was supplied were miraculously renewed till the completion of the building (Cabrol and Leclercq, 1903-53).

To add further to the confusion, Dulaure's "Histoire de Paris" (1821-25) mentions that there are no less than seven "genuine" heads of St. Denis in various parts of France. This rather multiplies the possibility of a spring having started beneath St. Denis's body.

If we look in another direction for an explanation, the possibility that water may have played a part in early treatment suggests itself, e.g. Fracastorius mentions the taking of Calderian baths, though he does not recommend this as a very effective cure.

Does the geography of Paris throw any light on the subject? None of the springs, fountains, or other water sources in the city seem to have any medicinal connexions with streets, churches, or buildings dedicated to, or named after, St. Denis. The St. Denis district of Paris has nothing to add, while the canal St. Denis was constructed only under the first Empire. Smaller streams in the St. Denis district, i.e. the Crould, the Rouillan, the Ru de Montford, and the Ru de la Ville Mer, are all now converted into sewers, and surely Gallic logic would not go this far with a miraculous stream.

About 1495, at the time of the syphilis epidemic, the *Hôpital de la Trinité* and the *Hôpital Ste Catherine* in the Rue St. Denis were already falling into disuse. The *Hôpital St. Lazare*, built in the 12th century, was at this period busy dealing with lepers

and probably also with syphilitics. Like Aberdeen and Edinburgh some months later, the Parlement together with the Bishops on March 6, 1496, issued an order for the expulsion from the city of Paris of "ceux qui ont gagné ladite maladie hors de cette ville, et qu'on ferait enfermer, nourrir et traiter ceux qui l'ont gagné à Paris". (*Régistres manuscrits du Parlement*). It was about this time that the burning question of the water supply to the *Hôpital St. Lazare* was finally settled, a supply being laid on by the aqueduct St. Gervais from Menilmontant to a reservoir at Pié St. Gervais and to the Faubourg St. Denis and the hospital. Could the strife and final accomplishment concerning this work have been given some significance in the mind of the writer of the prayer? The water supply in Paris remained a thorny question throughout the 14th and 15th centuries.

Other saints seem to have been associated with syphilis, but have had less popular support. A second prayer in the Munich library written in the Nuremberg dialect is addressed to St. Minus (Menus or Monus). Two other prayers are addressed in similar terms to the Blessed Virgin. Syphilis, it will be noted from the list given, was also called "mal de Sto. Job Lazarino", but St. Denis, in spite of such scanty evidence, appears to hold pride of place as the patron saint of syphilitics.

ADDENDUM

Since submitting this MS I have taken the opportunity, during a holiday in Bavaria, to visit libraries in München with a view to locating a copy of the original prayer. There seems little doubt that it was first printed in black and white from a woodcut by Georg Stuchs of Nuremberg in 1497. Such prayers were on sale locally. A few would be painted. The background shows a local scene and one that was in common use for prayer woodcuts. St. Denis on the right, being one of the fourteen emergency saints, appears with the Virgin Mary. This was the rule in such prints. A rash-marked supplicant is shown in each bottom corner.

I am grateful to Miss Gesine Bertheau of the Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München, for help in locating the old prayer.

My thanks are also due to Dr. Karl Dachs, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, for background information, and to Miss Joan Balaam, of the Research and Information Bureau of *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, for the translation of the prayer and a guide to further reading.

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BOOK REVIEW

Roxburgh's Common Skin Diseases. Twelfth Edition, 1961. Revised by Peter Borrie, M.A., M.D., F.R.C.P. Pp. 478, 231 figs, 8 col. pl. Lewis, London. (50s.).

Although now almost 30 years have passed since its first edition and 6 years since the death of Dr. Roxburgh, this book, ably revised by Dr. Peter Borrie, continues to be as popular and successful as ever. Based on the practice and methods of Dr. Roxburgh, who was a born teacher, it contains an adequate and concise account of most of the advances in treatment and technique and is well suited to the needs of student and practitioner. For the most part, the changes made since the 11th edition consist in the re-arrangement and presentation of the facts rather than precise clinical detail, although the illustrations are increased in number, most of them new and without exception of good quality.

The chapter on venereal diseases, re-written for the 11th edition by Dr. C. S. Nicol, has been left

unaltered. Of necessity in a textbook of dermatology, the consideration of syphilis is abbreviated but an adequate account of the pathology and cutaneous lesions is given. Major alterations have been made in the chapter dealing with psychogenic factors, seborrhoea, fungus diseases, purpura, and psoriasis. In the chapter devoted to the last of these subjects, room might perhaps have been found in the differential diagnosis to mention Reiter's syndrome with generalized keratoderma which can often appear more akin to arthropathic psoriasis than to rheumatoid arthritis. The circinate balanitis, genital lesions of keratoderma, and tongue lesions found very commonly in cases of Reiter's syndrome might be included with advantage in the differential diagnosis of genital and oral lesions. These are small points and in no way detract from the solid virtues of the book which, although increased in price, remains good value for money.

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